

# Our Journey to Reading Success

*The founders of one urban school developed a powerful curriculum for struggling readers.*

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**W**e founded the Family Academy in 1991, inspired by our own experience as teachers in East Harlem. As a neighborhood public school, the Family Academy drew students from the West Harlem community with the single admissions criterion that students had to live within a 10-block radius of the school. More than 90 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

As the school's name indicates, we designed our mission to foster a sense of community among students, educators, and families. We envisioned the Family Academy as a place that would build basic skills and promote healthy emotional and social growth in all students. We also structured the K-8 school to provide school-centered social services for families by coordinating access to public housing, legal aid, health care, and foster care.

The early years of the school were a huge success: Students were happy, teachers were happy, and parents were happy. Clearly, the core elements of design suited our urban school. But we soon realized that our young students were not learning to read.

In 1994, our 3rd grade students took the New York City CTBS reading test—a version of the California Test Battery—for the first time. They “achieved” the lowest scores in the entire city—quite

an accomplishment in New York!

Stunned at the scores, we knew we had to take drastic measures. Somebody has to have the lowest scores in the city, but we didn't need to earn that distinction twice. We plunged into the daunting task of overhauling the curriculum by conducting a comprehensive review of the research literature on reading and by carefully observing our own students. These dual strategies served us well. Step-by-step, we investigated, implemented, assessed, and reworked various research-based instructional methods. When the literature provided no clear solutions, we developed our own practices. Eventually, our efforts laid the groundwork for a powerful new curriculum that

- Cultivated students' phonological awareness.
- Improved students' reading skills through systematic phonics.
- Supported students' reading efforts and stretched their minds with a combination of controlled readers and rich trade literature.
- Increased students' reading fluency.
- Built students' knowledge of vital vocabulary.

## Phonological Awareness

Although the significance was initially lost on us, we had seen that our first cohort of students leaving the primary grades were struggling with *invented*

*spelling*—a term referring to beginning readers' and writers' attempts to spell a word when the standard spelling is unknown. Students “invent” spellings for words by arranging letters according to their knowledge of sounds or visual patterns. Our students' weakness in invented spelling was a strong indicator that our reading program was not working.

At the same time, the literature we reviewed showed that poor *phonological awareness*—the recognition of how sounds can be manipulated and how they are part of spoken language—was the single most consistent indicator of early reading failure (Adams, 1991; National Reading Panel, 2000). Our students knew their letters, and they knew the sounds of each letter. But they seemed befuddled by the task of stringing letters together to make words. It made sense to us that starting this “stringing” process early in kindergarten—with students first stringing together individual sounds and then combining those sounds with letters—would make invented spelling and reading far easier for them. Through a variety of simple games, songs, and other activities, we cultivated in the students a newfound phonological awareness. In one activity, students affixed sounds to root words to form new words—adding the /m/ sound to “at” to form the word “mat,” for example. In another activity, a teacher read aloud a list of words (“boy,”

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Photos by Daniela Liben

"school," "sit") and asked students to raise their hands when they heard a given sound, such as /t/. (For more activities, see Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1997.)

As the same students started to write, they cast their memories back to these activities. When we asked our kindergartners and 1st graders why they wrote so well, many students actually named the blending games and activities from the phonological awareness program. They were aware not only of how writing worked but also of how they had learned to write. Our littlest students had become "metacognitive munchkins."

### Systematic Phonics

How could we further improve our students' reading skills? Much of the literature that had espoused phonological awareness also advocated *systematic phonics*: the sequenced introduction of sound-symbol relationships, structured review and assessment, and, in some cases, controlled readers (National Reading Panel, 2000). This direct approach, especially the use of controlled readers, was poles apart from our teaching methods. We believed that such structured programs would produce superficial readers who were able to decode without comprehension and read without interest. Phonological

awareness meant games, poetry, and songs; systematic phonics meant worksheets, rules, and ability grouping. We were convinced that our metacognitive munchkins would transform into rule-driven robots!

Still, we didn't believe that phonological awareness alone would suffice. Despite our skepticism about systematic phonics, we recognized that many commercial phonics programs had produced successful results. We decided to observe these programs in action. Unfortunately, we found most of them too scripted to work well at our school. In one school we visited, we actually witnessed a seasoned teacher flounder and put her class on hold while she found her place in the manual.

Somewhere in the world of research and experience there had to be an acceptable method that we could weave into our own program. In the end, we adopted *Explode the Code* (Hall, 1984-1994), a well-known phonics workbook program that provides a sequence of spelling/sound patterns to follow and systematic review and practice.

The danger of workbooks is that they can become a substitute for teaching. But by staying aware of the danger, we were able to avoid it. We developed communal lesson plans and weekly

overviews that provided activities and materials for teachers to use to introduce each spelling/sound pattern. The teachers reinforced the workbook's lessons on phonetic patterns with games, poetry, and other activities. When we asked one young student how she had learned to read so well, she replied, "The teacher put it in my brain." We then asked her what the workbook did. She paused before saying, "It pushes it down and keeps it there."

### What to Read?

The next—and, perhaps, most controversial—question we asked ourselves was, What materials should the students read? Many of the articles we were reading advocated controlled reading texts, but other literacy advocates scorned this practice.

Again, we turned to our own students to make our decisions. In the past, we had begun reading instruction in kindergarten using predictable texts. After observing the kindergarten in which phonological awareness had become a way of life, however, we realized that these texts made no use of the students' newfound phonological abilities, so we began having students read simple decodable books. The first students we worked with were easily able to blend the sounds in monosyllabic consonant-vowel-consonant words—"tin" and "cod," for example. Interestingly, these students held their hands apart and then clapped them together to represent the "coming together" of the sounds, exactly as they had in the oral blending games used in our phonological awareness program. This phenomenon indicated to us that successful decoding was a direct product of phonological awareness. Beginning their reading with reliably coded words enabled early readers to refine their decoding abilities as an offshoot of their phonological facility.

But decodable books are not literature. We anticipated a limit on student interest in "The pigs do jigs." This "interest factor" was the most enduring challenge in the

development of our early reading program, and the world of research provided no clear answer. Once again, the students and our homegrown research provided the guidance we needed.

Every day at the Family Academy, students chose books from beautiful classroom libraries for independent reading time. One day, we were observing a 1st grade class reading quietly when one restless little boy asked if he could read *Mac and Tab*, one of the controlled readers. It had never occurred to us to provide students with these books for independent reading. But at that week's faculty meeting, we decided

Our powerful program was born from research, from experience, and—most important—from staying carefully attuned to young children.

to put out controlled readers during independent reading time, guessing that students who needed the support of these books would gravitate to them. Our hunch proved correct. In addition, these students often chose to read the books with partners, creating informal coaching pairs! Interesting text just wasn't an issue for these students; their primary goal was to achieve reading success.

This discovery alleviated much of our anxiety about the sterility of controlled text. The "Read Aloud" program that we developed allayed any remaining concern. In this program, we chose the reading material and ensured that we read to every class for at least 40 minutes daily. As a result, books and authors became a continuous source of celebration in our school. Twice a year, we collected a sample of every student's writing for an event that we called Authors' Celebrations and Signings. We made sure that parents knew this was a "must-attend" ritual. We also hosted an

annual National Book Award Author-in-Residence Week, which brought us such distinguished authors as Ashley Bryan, Nikki Giovanni, Walter Dean Myers, and Katherine Paterson.

Our 1st graders generally stayed in controlled readers for three to six months before moving on to literature. Over the years, we have found that this practice supports the students who need it most and propels the rest into literature at a faster clip. Reading aloud to students, discussing wonderful books daily, and celebrating good authors more than compensated for a few months of *Mac and Tab*.

### Increasing Fluency

Soon our 1st graders graduated from *Mac and Tab*'s spare adventures to the more exciting stories of Frog, Toad, and Little Bear. All of our students were now reading trade literature. We were happy with the students' decoding abilities and were thrilled to see them enjoying reading. Our next goal: complete fluency for all.

What the research on fluency revealed to us was simple: Reading text repeatedly increases fluency. Children love poems, riddles, and silly stories, so we made our students a "fluency packet" filled with all kinds of short literature. Studying one selection each week, students read aloud at home daily and in front of the class at least once a week. A favorite of teachers and students alike, the fluency packet quickly became a springboard for a variety of writing and dramatic activities.

### The Knowledge Problem

Having met the fluency challenge, we started to notice that our 2nd and 3rd

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graders' ability to read was outstripping their vocabulary. They were routinely encountering and accurately decoding words they didn't know. When we began thinking of how to teach students the vocabulary they needed, we realized that we didn't *know* what vocabulary they needed. In our quest to resolve this problem, we first tracked the most common words to appear in print for each grade of elementary school (K-6). Then we enlisted the help of *The Educator's Word Frequency Guide* (Zeno, Ivens, Millard, & Duvvuri, 1995), which tracks trade literature, children's magazines, textbooks, basal readers, and any other printed materials that children commonly encounter. Many words—such as “porch,” “crisp,” and “appear”—turned out to be just the types of words that our students would decode without comprehension.

We were misleading ourselves in naming this a vocabulary problem. If you don't know what a porch is, you do not have a *vocabulary* problem; you have a *knowledge* problem (Hirsch, 2003). And this lack of knowledge is as powerful a force in limiting a student's ability to flourish academically as are decoding deficits and fluency failures.

If we had discussed this problem directly with the students, they probably would have looked puzzled, as if to say, “This is obvious. Just teach us the words we need to know.” So we set out to respond to the students' imaginary plea by creating a “general knowledge curriculum.” Our goal was to equip our students with the knowledge and accompanying vocabulary that authors would assume they knew.

First, we divided the words that we had tracked into nine broad categories: animals and agriculture, health and life

science, geography, neighborhoods and communities, transportation, sports and games, careers, holidays and celebrations, and, finally, such specific genre words as “princess,” “kingdom,” and “tale.” We realized that it would be nearly impossible to teach the vast vocabulary to students word-by-word, so we decided that the knowledge had to come from immersion in the categories themselves; these categories would be the basis of our general knowledge curriculum.

We turned to what we were teaching in our content areas. We certainly touched on many of these subjects in our K-2 science and social studies classes, but not with enough consistency. So we gave teachers across the content areas lists of vocabulary words divided into the categories to make it easier for them to introduce and emphasize these words in context. To further bolster the curriculum, we provided the teachers with lists of read-aloud and picture books, videos, Web sites, class projects, and field trips for each category. Finally, we familiarized ourselves with the research on effective transmittal of vocabulary (Biemiller, 1999; Stahl, 1999) to ensure that we could help students fully master the content.

### Journey's End

Our school now had the curriculum and the results to match the strong supports we had in place from the beginning. In the four years following the implementation of the curriculum, our reading scores soared 530 percent to put us in the top one-third of New York City elementary schools—another confirmation of the strength of our practices.

We built our reading program from the ground up because we did not want

our students' success to be up for grabs. The elements of our powerful program were born from research, from experience, and—most important—from staying carefully attuned to young children. Once again, students were happy, teachers were happy, and parents were happy. The difference now was that everybody was happily reading, too, with fluency and facility. ■

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*Authors' note:* The Family Academy closed its doors in June 2003. However, our online curriculum, now known as “Urban Education Exchange,” is in its third edition and currently in use in three other inner-city schools. Visit [www.ueexchange.org](http://www.ueexchange.org) for more information.

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